BRITISH ACCREDITATION COUNCIL INSPECTION REPORT

INTERIM VISIT
(Independent Higher Education)

INSTITUTION: Varna University of Management

ADDRESS: 13A Oborishte Street
Varna 9000
Bulgaria

HEAD OF INSTITUTION: Associate Professor Todor Radev

DATE OF VISIT: 18 October 2017

ACCREDITATION COMMITTEE DECISION ON ACCREDITATION: Continued accreditation 14 December 2017

PART A - INTRODUCTION

1.   Background to the institution

Varna University of Management (VUM/the Institution) traces its origins to the International University College (IUC) Albena, which was established in 1992 with the support of the Dutch Government. In 2007, IUC Sofia, previously an independent organisation, merged with the IUC Albena. The expanded IUC became a Higher School of Management reflecting its status as a tertiary institute with provision to award degrees in one academic field, for example in business, management, hospitality and tourism and Information Technology (IT). The Institution gained the status of a University of Management by order of parliament in May 2015. It operates on three campuses Dobrich and Varna, in the east of Bulgaria, and Sofia in the west. The headquarters are in Varna.

The Institution aims to provide a high-quality education to meet the needs of contemporary business through an interdisciplinary approach with a focus on developing the entrepreneurial skills of students. It aims to foster active relationships with business.

The University is overseen by the Board of Trustees to which the Rector of VUM reports. The principal academic committee is the Academic Board, chaired by the Rector. The Rector is supported by three vice rectors with remits in academic affairs and quality, business liaison and international standards, and research and development. There is also an executive director.

2.   Brief description of the current provision

The University offers a range of bachelor's and master's programmes in the areas of business and management. This includes bachelor's programmes in software engineering, business information systems, business and managements studies with finance, international business and international tourism and international hospitality management. Master's programmes include a Master of Business Administration (MBA), and international hospitality and tourism management. All these programmes are validated by VUM's partner in the United Kingdom (UK) Cardiff Metropolitan University (CMU). There are articulation arrangements for the bachelor's programmes and students graduate with a dual award from CMU and VUM, provided they complete the additional work required by the Bulgarian authorities for gaining a master's or bachelor's degree.

At the time of the visit, there were 21 full-time and 32 part-time teaching staff, 37 administrative staff and 21 ancillary staff. 235 students, all full time, were enrolled on courses across the three campuses.

2.   Inspection visit process

The interim inspection was carried out over half a day by one inspector. The visit was to the Sofia Campus, which was not visited during the last inspection. The visit included meetings with two vice rectors and the Academic Director, a meeting with eight teaching staff and a meeting with 12 students from all years of the bachelor's programme and some master's students. The Institution had prepared well for the visit, providing a progress report and access to documentation in advance as well as further documentation during the visit. All meeting participants engaged positively and helpfully during discussions.

4.   Inspection history

Full accreditation: 8-11 May 2004

Interim: 21 September 2005

Re-accreditation: 27-28 April 2009

Interim: 18 May 2011

Re-accreditation: 3-4 October 2013

Interim: 3 February 2016

Re-accreditation: 14-15 December 2016

PART B – JUDGMENTS AND EVIDENCE

The following judgments and comments are based upon evidence seen by the inspector(s) during the inspection and from documentation provided by the institution

1.   Significant changes since the last inspection

There are no significant changes since the last re-accreditation inspection. However, the University has undergone a further accreditation by the National Assessment and Accreditation Agency of Bulgaria. Preparation for this entailed developing or revising significant amounts of documentation. The report from the Bulgarian authorities had not been received at the time of this inspection.

3.   Response to action points in last report

4.4 4.5 4.6 VUM must formalise the reporting structure including purpose, terms of reference, membership, process and reporting lines for each committee or meeting.

VUM has developed extensive documentation, which includes a revised organisational chart, the terms of reference, remit, membership and reporting lines for the constituent committees and the associated meetings. VUM has used a consistent format for these documents. This is helpful and enables ease of access.

4.7 6.4 There must be publication of policies covering, for example, health and safety, and diversity and discrimination and VUM must ensure that all policies are supplemented by clear, precise procedures for their enforcement.

VUM has further developed and published a range of policies which meet the expectations of the Bulgarian authorities and CMU as its partner. The policies are available on the website as well as in student and staff guidance documents. The Institution has also developed appropriate procedures for the implementation of the policies, outlining, for example, the stages of a grievance process. These are entirely clear. Staff reported that they are aware of the policies and procedures and are reminded of them during the academic year in formal meetings and by e-mail. Students are also aware of these through the handbook and from induction as well as being reminded of them in some classes. As a result, they are clear what they should do if needed.

4.8 The University must ensure that all information, internal and external, is up-to-date and accurate.

Significant work has been undertaken to ensure that all information, internal and external, is up-to-date and accurate. This work coincided with the introduction of a new website and new regulations. Responsibility for the accuracy of information is clearly delegated to the most senior officer in the relevant area. Additionally, rules and regulations, and major documents, including programme handbooks, are signed off by the Academic Board.

5.4 VUM must strengthen procedures for the acquisition of academic resources to support programmes.

The Institution has prepared a guidance document on the procedures for the acquisition of academic resources. The senior management team monitor the development of resources. Particular importance is being given to the provision of electronic resources to ensure that the materials are appropriate for the current programmes.

5.5 VUM must ensure greater consistency across the University, for example in staff appraisal practice including the conduct of teaching observations.

The University has a clearly documented staff appraisal system in place which covers teaching, administration and research. Staff complete a report on the work they have carried out as well as preparing a personal development plan, which includes both long and short-term goals. The frequency of staff appraisal is linked to the status of the member of staff, professor or associate professor, for example, as required by Bulgarian regulation. VUM conducts appraisal more frequently than required by the Bulgarian regulations and has a

schedule of when the appraisals will happen. All staff met reported that they had undergone staff appraisal. Staff also reported that they had undergone teaching observations. These are carried out by the senior staff on a spot check basis, meaning that a member of staff is not aware of the observation in advance. The Institution is comfortable with this approach, which functions well in the context. All staff met were clear that they had been observed and had received helpful feedback from the observer following the observation.

8.8 VUM must implement the sharing of good practice in devising lesson plans to ensure that they are fit-for-purpose and that they are easily accessed by administration when required.

All lesson plans, which are predominantly in a slideshow format, are submitted to the administration and loaded onto the intranet. Students can access the relevant plans for their courses and staff can access all the material, which effectively promotes the sharing of good practice. It also provides a resource for new members of staff or staff coming new to the teaching of a particular module. This is appropriate for the Institution.

13.4 VUM must publish formal policies to avoid discrimination and abusive behaviour and provide detailed procedures for dealing with them.

The policies which VUM has revised and developed during the last year include policies and procedures to avoid discrimination and abusive behaviour. Both staff and students confirmed their awareness of these policies and procedures.

15.2 15.3 15.4 15.5 The University must adopt a more systematic and prompt means of identifying and addressing poor student attendance and monitoring student progress.

Attendance registers are taken in every class and these are submitted to the administration, which monitors attendance. Where absence has not been authorised, staff follow this up appropriately and the administration monitors the follow up. Senior staff were able to identify examples of student absence being followed up. To further support the management of attendance and monitoring of student progress in a more formalised way, VUM has developed a personal tutor system which was being fully implemented in the 2017 to 2018 academic year. Staff were clear about their role as a personal tutor and had received an appropriate briefing and training. They reported that it was still too early in the implementation to assess the impact of the system on attendance and addressing poor performance.

24.2 24.3 The University must review and enhance the standard of Information Technology (IT) provision, including reliability, internet access and the application software available to support programmes.

The Institution has negotiated a contract with its service provider, which has improved the internet speed. This work has still to be finalised. Two new computer labs have been provided on the Varna campus and the University has had funding approved for the purchase of additional computers which will improve the provision on all three campuses.

3.   Response to recommended areas for improvement in last report

It is recommended that VUM publishes key documents in English to aid transparency.

VUM's strategy for the provision of documents in English is to focus on the student facing documents, including all documentation relating to modules and programmes. The strategy is appropriate and ensures that all students are able to access relevant documentation in English.

The University is advised to make the risk assessment process more explicit.

The academic board discusses a risk assessment report annually. The plan for managing risk includes demand and marketing, students studying abroad and staff and administration. The report also includes mitigating strategies. The approach to and management of risk is clear and appropriate.

The introduction of a personal tutor, or similar system, is advised to enable an overview of each student's progress and facilitate early remedial intervention.

The University has developed a personal tutor system for full implementation during the 2017 to 2018 academic year. It was too early at the time of the visit for the Institution to assess what the impact of the scheme is. The scheme is well described and staff have received an appropriate briefing and guidance on the system.

VUM is recommended to produce a comprehensive student guide and staff handbook to accommodate the whole range of relevant policies and procedures referred to in this report.

VUM has produced a Student Guide, dated 2017, which includes all the policies and procedures referred to in the report and academic information relevant to the student. Service Quality Guidelines, dated 2016, are directed at all staff and include guidance on behaviour and attitude as well as information and guidance on academic management, such as module handbook and examination processes. Not all the policies recently developed are included in the Guidelines. However, they are available on the website, and staff reported that they were fully aware of them.

The University is advised to increase staff and student awareness of the complaints procedure.

The regulations for submitting complaints and how these are handled are published on the student affairs section on the website. The complaints procedure template is also published on the same section of the website. Students are made aware of the regulations and the procedures during induction week. Neither students nor staff were aware of BAC's complaints procedure.

It is recommended that VUM provides more detailed photographs of residential accommodation.

Photographs of residential accommodation were sent in advance of the visit and are available on the Institution's website. These provide sufficient detail for potential students.

It is recommended that VUM provides a University out-or-hours emergency number.

The University provides out-of-hours contact numbers that are specific to each campus. The senior managers provided an example of how the out-of-hours contact numbers had been used which evidenced that the provision is effective.

It is suggested that the University makes opportunities for accreditation of students' prior learning and prior experiential learning more explicit.

Information on the recognition of prior learning is included in the admission rules and regulations. These also cover the regulations for applying the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) at VUM, which is the award, allocation and recognition of credits. However, Bulgarian legislation of higher education does not yet allow the recognition of prior experiential learning.

The University is recommended to provide more guidance on opportunities for progression to further study outside VUM.

VUM has addressed this by including in the handbooks for Level 6 and Level 7 students an explanation of the transfer opportunities to CMU.

VUM is advised to ensure greater staff and student awareness of health and safety issues and to provide more explicit provision of guidance on these issues.

The Varna University of Management Student Guide addresses issues of health and safety. These helpfully draw relevant distinctions between campuses and between home and international students.

Consideration should be given to increasing library space and extending opening times.

Some work has been carried out in Varna on the library to extend the space. Photographs of the library were submitted as part of the advance information. The library in Sofia meets the needs of the student body based there, both in terms of space and opening hours.

It is recommended that the University introduces a student portal to facilitate and expand students' easy access to internal information and external learning resources.

VUM is developing the intranet and the new platform, once installed, will further enable ease of access to both internal and external information. Students reported that they were fully satisfied with the online learning resources.

4. Compliance with BAC accreditation requirements

4.1 Governance, Strategy and Financial Management (spot check)

	Met	Partially met	Not met	
The standards are judged to be	✓			
Comments				
VUM continues to have sound governance arrangements and be financially robust. It is led by a stable and experienced senior management team.				

4.2 Academic Management and Administration (spot check)

	Met	Partially met	Not met	
The standards are judged to be	✓			
Comments				
Academic management and administration continue to be strong with an appropriate emphasis on achieving consistency between the three campuses.				

4.3 Teaching, Learning and Assessment (spot check)

	Met	Partially met	Not met	
The standards are judged to be	✓			
Comments				
Teaching is valued by the student**s.** Staff are well qualified and supported in their further development. There is an annual training event for all three campuses with one day dedicated to teaching, one to research and another to administrative and contextual developments. Teaching staff also share best practice at faculty meetings, which happen once a semester, as well as informally. VUM has not explored the potential that the peer observation of teaching might provide, as a vehicle for sharing effective practice, from which both the observer and the observed can gain valuable insights and ideas.				

4.4 Student Recruitment, Support, Guidance and Progression (spot check)

	Met	Partially met	Not met	
The standards are judged to be	✓			
Comments				
Students are well supported and appreciate the responsiveness of the organisation both administratively and academically. Students interviewed showed no awareness of the BAC Complaints Procedure or that it was available to them if needed. The senior management should make the this available to both students and staff. Information is readily available both electronically and in hard copy. VUM's website covers all three campuses. However, the Sofia campus is much less visible and may mean that potential students are not fully aware of what is available. The success rates in achievement and employment are evidence of good student support and guidance.				

4.5   Premises, Facilities and Learning Resources (spot check)

	Met	Partially met	Not met	
The standards are judged to be	✓			
Comments				

The Sofia premises are light and airy. Classrooms are spacious and appropriately equipped.

The library is light and airy and there is a room off the library for quiet study.

4.6   Quality Management, Assurance and Enhancement (spot check)

	Met	Partially met	Not met	
The standards are judged to be	✓			
Comments				

The Institution pays close attention to its quality management reviewing processes to reflect the demands of accrediting bodies

Senior management demonstrated a commitment to the enhancement of the educational provision, the infrastructure and its management.

PART C – SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND ACTION POINTS

STRENGTHS
Strong stable management of the Institution.
High levels of support for and responsiveness to students.
Extensive documentation providing information to staff and students.

ACTIONS REQUIRED	Priority H/M/L
24.2 24.3 The Institution should continue to monitor IT provision once the changes have been implemented.	L

RECOMMENDED AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT
It is recommended that the Institution explores the potential enhancements to teaching that a peer observation of teaching might provide.
It is recommended that senior management ensure that the BAC complaints procedure is made known to both staff and students.
VUM should consider raising the profile of the Sofia provision on its website.

COMPLIANCE WITH STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS	
Declaration of compliance has been signed and dated.	**YES**
Further comments, if applicable	